

PUBLIC LIBRARY IN TODAY'S WORLD – SOCIAL AND LEGAL ASPECTS

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Abstract

Libraries have a long history. They existed ever since writing began. Historical transformation affected not only the contents of libraries, but also their form, mission, functions and services. With changing times and societies, evolving information and communication technologies, and contrary to predictions that libraries might lose their role and disappear altogether, they have changed along with the needs, demands and habits of society, learned to draw on new technologies, so forming a completely new understanding of libraries, their definition and role in today's educational, cultural, political and social environment. Development of the library sector was affected also by global changes and crises, but libraries were able to respond to challenges and use them as an opportunity for development, positive changes and transformation. This was mainly thanks to a user-oriented approach pursued by libraries, putting people and their needs, demands and rights at the heart of library activities. This forms a new culture of libraries, taking the place of their old philosophy, which was collection-oriented. Libraries provide free access to information, knowledge, education, cultural heritage and cultural events, and play a key role in science, lifelong learning, developing digital skills, improving literacy and information literacy in society, strengthening democracy and ensuring civic participation, promoting the use of creative potential, and ensuring access to state and municipal services. Thus, the phenomenon of today's library is associated with

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both accumulating and preserving cultural heritage and taking part in securing an individual's social and civil rights.

The article analyses the phenomenon of the public library as a cultural establishment, its role in meeting the social needs of society, and problems of legislation in the sustainable development of library activities. The focus of the article is on public libraries, as their main task is to provide services to the entire society. The analysis of the legal framework was carried out in the context of Latvia, observing the international framework. This is necessary to understand how the legal framework can ensure the development of libraries. Following the mission of libraries to act for the public good and to put people and their needs at the heart of library activities, the legal framework for libraries should reflect and protect public interests and an individual's right to information, freedom of expression and association, diversity of opinion and belief, artistic freedom, equal treatment, culture and education. A narrow understanding of library functions can restrict the right of access to information, education, culture and social services. The legislator should introduce library functions in the legal framework by including also a social aspect, clarifying and expanding information, educational and cultural functions.

Keywords: *library, cultural space, cultural heritage, civil rights, social rights.*

Introduction

Considering the multi-functional role of libraries in sustainability of society, a state's positive duty is to develop a legal framework that would provide the legal basis that is necessary for the functioning of public libraries, including financing. The legal framework should serve as the legal basis for the effective functioning of libraries, the safeguarding of public interests and rights, and the justification of necessary funding. Libraries should be strengthened both legally and in practice as institutions securing the effective functioning and needs of a democratic society, as mechanisms for strengthening democratic values, as contemporary and multi-functional information, cultural, educational and social centres.

Trends for the development of public libraries are defined in *Public Library Manifesto 2022* issued by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (hereinafter – IFLA), according to which the public library is the local centre of information, making all kinds of knowledge and information readily available to its users [IFLA 2022]. The role of libraries in community's life, lifelong learning and development of civil society is thus underscored. These are three pillars forming a sustainable, socially responsible and prosperous society. These trends should underpin public library legislation. In Latvia, public libraries

are governed by the *Library Law* [Latvijas Republikas Saeima 1998] and relevant Cabinet regulations, such as the *Norms of Financing Needed for Library Activities* [Ministru kabinets 2001], the *Norms of the Material and Technical Basis of Libraries* [Ministru kabinets 2001a], *the Regulation for the Accreditation of Libraries* [Ministru kabinets 2006], etc. Theoretically, the legislation is comprehensive, while practice is revealing certain deficiencies associated with the application of these rules. For instance, the list of library functions provided in the legislation has become obsolete, which hinders libraries in obtaining financing they need, meanwhile conferring upon local governments a wide discretion to open and shut down libraries, and, in certain situations, municipal budget availability prevails over society's cultural and social needs. By highlighting the role of the public library in community's and society's life, policy planners and politicians need to be alerted to the existing problems in order to facilitate the improvement of the legal framework in line with the needs of contemporary society in the public library sector. The impact of private libraries on providing important functions to society is less. The differences can be seen in features, availability, resource management and target audience. Private libraries can be created with a specific purpose or on a topic of interest to their founders or members. Public libraries, on the other hand, serve the general public and are oriented towards general access to information. Private libraries usually serve specific groups with special interests and needs. The scope of the public interest dictates that the focus of the article is on public libraries.

Public library yesterday, today and tomorrow

As institutions, libraries initially ensure the collection, accumulation, keeping and systematisation of cultural and historical sources. The first libraries were located in palaces and temples but they were not open to the public and were confined only to the ruling class [Pettegree, Weduwen 2021]. Libraries retained their elite status for a long time. Researchers demark the development of public libraries by the following stages: in the Middle Ages, books were still expensive to produce and acquire, they had the status of a prestigious and valuable item, a work of art as the highest expression of visual art; in the Renaissance period, science, art and literature flourished, the value system of society changed, marking a new era also in the existence of libraries. In Europe, the number of universities, where medicine, law, philosophy and theology were taught, grew rapidly. Universities took over the formation of libraries from monasteries. The invention of printing technology in the 15th century was the greatest revolution and pivotal point in the history of books and libraries; also, the expansion of libraries and the demand for books were fuelled by the growth in the world population, the development of education and literacy, emerging new ways and routes of book transportation

[Pettegree, Weduwen 2021]. It can be concluded that the development of libraries is linked both to technological progress, which created objective prerequisites for the development of libraries' technical facilities, and to social and cultural changes in society, which enabled an increasing number of people to use the opportunities brought by libraries.

The post-World War II library can be seen as the landmark in the development of modern library. This period marks a rapid change in human consciousness, in the transformation of the perception of rights as a value, and in the library as an institution that provides resources necessary for an individual's development. Meanwhile, technology is also evolving rapidly, with the advent of technological tools that did not exist before – the Internet and, more recently, artificial intelligence. Information, communication and digital technologies were developing during the 20th century, and their evolution continues in the 21st century at an unthinkable pace; they are becoming even more complex and advanced, thereby posing challenges for both the library – not to lose its role – and the legislator – to predict potential development scenarios to be in a position to provide the appropriate legislation. Based on the recent count, there were more than 400,000 public libraries in the world in 2022 [IFLA 2022a].

The mission of public libraries is to serve the society. This is a statutory obligation. The National Library of Latvia is of special importance in the structure of Latvian public libraries. As follows from the legal framework – “*The National Library of Latvia is a universal research library of the Republic of Latvia which is generally accessible by the public and serves for the intellectual development of the whole nation*” [Latvijas Republikas Saeima 1992].

Public and research libraries serve important but different functions in society. Both are essential for education, access to information and cultural preservation, but their target audiences, resources and services differ.

Both public and research libraries are very important, and each contributes in its own way to public education, cultural preservation and access to information. Public libraries are more oriented towards broad public involvement and daily needs, while scientific libraries are specialized in supporting academic and research works. The phenomenon of the National Library of Latvia is the ability to combine both the traditional public and scientific library missions. The third part of Article 1 of the Law “On the National Library of Latvia” [Latvijas Republikas Saeima 1992] states that “*the National Library of Latvia is a part of the national wealth of the Republic of Latvia*”. It obliges the state to provide the National Library of Latvia with adequate resources. On the other hand, the contribution of the National Library of Latvia to society is the provision of diverse and regular educational, cultural, social and other events necessary for society.

In order to achieve the goal of the law and ensure the development of libraries, the *Library Industry Strategy 2023–2027* has been adopted. The overarching goal of the library industry strategy for 2023–2027 is “*to develop libraries as an excellent resource for smart and sustainable societal growth, which ensures preservation and accessibility of Latvia’s cultural heritage, improves society’s literacy and information literacy, ensures civic participation and supports cultural, educational and scientific processes, promotes the use of creative potential, strengthening social cohesion and resilience, ensures the provision of state and local government services*” [Latvijas Bibliotēku padome 2023]. The strategic goals of the library industry are: 1) to promote the sustainability of the library industry; 2) promote renewal and professional development of library specialists; 3) ensures the availability of cultural, educational and research resources and services; 4) promote public participation in cultural, educational and research processes. When applying the relevant legal framework, it is necessary to be guided by the set goals. Strategic goals reflect the direction of libraries towards ensuring people’s well-being, building a socially responsible state and meeting the needs of a democratic state.

The role of the modern library in social communication

Today’s library has evolved far from the original and longest-lasting conception of the library as a physical space for collecting, preserving and accessing information, which prevailed in its history. Historical transformation affected not only the contents of libraries, but also their outward appearance, mission, functions and services. With changing times, eras, societies and political regimes, evolving information and communication technologies, and contrary to predictions that libraries might lose their role and disappear altogether, they have changed along with the needs, demands and habits of society, learned to draw on new technologies, so forming a completely new understanding of libraries, their definition and role in today’s educational, cultural, information and social environment. Development of the library sector was affected also by global changes and crises, but libraries were able to respond to challenges and use them as an opportunity for their development, positive changes and transformation. Not only have the mission, functions and tasks of libraries changed, but also their outward appearance. Library professionals and researchers conclude that libraries today are more than just physical spaces; they are community hubs, a platform and even a social movement [Lankes 2019]. It is hard not to concur with this opinion because libraries have evolved from being initially perceived as a physical space whose core function is to accumulate printed matter to open and public sites with a much broader array of functions and interdisciplinary nature, bringing together culture, education, information, technology and social area. The legal treatment of certain matters is lagging behind what is actually needed in library

legislation. According to Article 2(1) of *the Library Law*, this law deals with public relationships in the field of libraries in order to ensure the operation of libraries and to facilitate the preservation and development of Latvia's cultural heritage [Latvijas Republikas Saeima 1998]. This provision shows that the purpose of the law is defined narrowly, omitting international legal relationships and the transnational role of the library, as well as disregarding the role of the library as a community hub. The future role of the library is linked to a wider use of technology, which undoubtedly calls for an appropriate legislation in place.

Development perspective

The biggest global industry association – IFLA, which maintains close links with the UN and other international organisations, determines professional trends and sets standards for library services, provides the following definition of public libraries in its recent trend report 2021: “*Public libraries are a world-wide phenomenon. Libraries occur in a variety of societies, in differing cultures and at different stages of development. Although the varied contexts in which libraries operate inevitably result in differences in the services provided, and the way those services are delivered, libraries normally have characteristics in common, which can be defined as follows. A public library is an organisation established, supported and funded by the community, either through local, regional or national government or through some other form of community organisation. It provides access to knowledge, information, lifelong learning, and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services and is equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic and employment status and educational attainment. The primary purpose of the public library is to provide resources and services in a variety of media to meet the needs of individuals and groups for education, information and personal development including recreation and leisure. They have an important role in the development and maintenance of a democratic society by giving the individual access to a wide and varied range of knowledge, ideas and opinion*” [IFLA 2022b].

The library of the future is based on the orientation of values towards securing human rights, both social rights and fundamental rights related to active citizenship, participation in social processes, lifelong learning and, of course, access to cultural heritage. There is an opinion in scientific literature which describes the library today and gives a preview of the library of tomorrow: “*We can view the library as a social phenomenon with a specific social mission, which is necessary for the development of society. The library is a multi-functional institution participating in social processes*” [Sporāne 2016]. Strengthening the social role of the library is a future challenge associated with library activities.

Role of the public library in today's civil society – Library in the protection of human rights

Libraries are predominantly educational, information and cultural institutions. In the 21st century, this function of libraries is perceived and interpreted in the broad sense. In addition, the library sector is characterised by the synergy and interaction of educational, information and cultural functions, which overlap, strengthen and supplement each other and cannot often be isolated from each other. As part of their information function, libraries provide access to high-quality, diverse and unique information resources and services. By supplying comprehensive information, the public library facilitates the involvement of society in the solution of major issues and important decision-making processes. A major function of public libraries is to bridge the gap between the information rich and the information poor by providing public access [edited by Koontz & Gubbin 2010]. Bridging the social gap and securing equal rights undeniably contribute to social peace, which is essential in the context of sustainability of both society and the state.

The understanding of rights starts with awareness, and it indeed requires literacy, whose promotion is now a voluntary initiative of the library. The role of the library in this educational aspect is underestimated, and it is not dealt with by law at a sufficient level. Nor is the libraries' capacity in supporting formal education used at the system level. Despite evidence of the role of libraries in the educational process, public libraries often have difficulties in proving their role and introducing it in educational guidelines and policies [Goulding 2017].

Promoting literacy and education overall as functions of the library are not the only areas that have largely been overlooked. Human rights also represent an area where libraries already have their contribution, which however can be greater. Based on their essence and underlying principles, public libraries are oriented towards the public good, meeting public needs and public accessibility.

Human rights as those promoted by libraries are referred to in the IFLA/ UNESCO Public Library Manifesto: *“The services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, language, social status, and any other characteristic. Specific services and materials must be provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities, poor digital or computer skills, poor literacy abilities or people in hospital or prison. All age groups must find material relevant to their needs”* [IFLA 2022]. Latvian legislation provides for the right to equal treatment, non-discrimination in having access to library services and their accessibility. Article 15(1)(8) of *the Library Law* lays down that each library has a duty *“to provide opportunities for library users to use the library services regardless of their gender, age, race, nationality, physical status, place of residence*

and location, and other factors as well as to develop appropriate equipment for the use of the library by persons with reduced mobility and visual impairments” [Latvijas Republikas Saeima 1998]. The principle of equality is consistently reflected in legislation. There are no difficulties with interpreting this principle, but it should be emphasised that in practice the services of libraries should be accessible financially, physically, functionally and digitally.

People’s rights to freedom of thought, conscience and expression are ensured by public libraries through broad information resources, which present different opinions, experiences, ideas and views. Collections should not be subject to any form of censorship. These principles are enshrined in the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto [IFLA 2022].

Library for culture and education

In the 21st century, libraries have evolved also as social centres, places for meetings, socialisation, exchange of ideas and co-creation. This role of libraries is particularly important in remote areas and regions, where the library may sometimes be the only available public cultural place and social centre. A well-used library building will make a significant contribution to the vitality of an urban area and be an important learning and social communication centre and meeting place, particularly in scattered rural areas [IFLA 2010]. Thus, libraries are among institutions that directly ensure the people’s right to freedom of assembly and association with others. These rights are enshrined in both international documents, such as Article 11 of the *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* [Council of Europe 1950], and national laws, such as Article 102 of *the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia* [Latvijas Republikas Saeima 1922]. Although this social function of libraries is being implemented in practice and is essential in the context of human rights, it is not specifically referred to in the Library Law, which hinders the development of public libraries in this field.

The role of libraries in education should also be emphasised. Libraries are educational institutions, and their core functions include building public education and fostering science, as defined also in *the Library Law* [Latvijas Republikas Saeima 1998].

All these functions of the public library are causally interlinked, so driving the development of a civil and democratic society. Libraries provide access to high-quality, diverse and unique information resources and services, including information raising awareness of an individual’s rights and fundamental rights, and of how they can be exercised and safeguarded.

In their capacity as cultural establishments, libraries provide cultural content and its accessibility, preserve heritage and facilitate the creation of new cultural

values. *The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia* has held that dignified life and minimum subsistence income comprise also a minimum level of involvement in social life and opportunities to meet cultural needs and participate in the political life of the country, in order to ensure that everyone is a full member of society [Latvijas Republikas Satversmes tiesa 2020].

In the library industry, there is a synergy and interaction of educational, informative and cultural functions, where they overlap, reinforce and complement each other, often they are indistinguishable from each other. Libraries offer an accessible and convenient opportunity to access culture and participate in cultural life, including by providing online events. They provide spaces for cultural activities, implement cultural events, supplement the library collection with cultural novelties, reflect the cultural diversity of the local society and support local cultural traditions.

Various events are provided by the National Library of Latvia. Ludmila Macpane, Head of the Branch Literature Centre of the Latvian National Library, *said that various cultural events can be related to research projects in which the library is involved, as well as discussions and readings, as well as those that accompany the library's exhibitions or publications. The National Library of Latvia regularly organizes seminars, discussions and readings also outside the library premises, for example, in municipal libraries or educational institutions. Conferences organized by clients are also held in the premises of the National Library of Latvia. Several cultural events are held every month. Current information is available on the library's website and social networks. As L. Macpane points out, it is difficult to single out one type of measures. Exhibitions and public lectures are well attended. As examples, L. Macpane cites the March 27, 2024 seminar "Artificial intelligence and education in the future", the anthropology reading series of the Latvian Association of Anthropologists "Stories about man", etc.* [Macpane 2024].

It can be concluded that the contribution of the library as a whole and the National Library of Latvia to education and culture is significant, giving the wider public the opportunity to participate in cultural and educational events.

Libraries should be recognised as important institutions, which contribute to a state's positive duty to ensure human rights. For instance, it would not be possible to effectively ensure the right to information without the participation of libraries. National legislation dealing with the library sector provides for library functions regarding the right to equal treatment, to freedom of expression and opinion, to information, education and culture, while the scope of these functions may be understood in various ways. The legal framework does not expressly or sufficiently refer to the social and communication function of libraries, which is related to the right of association.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that nowadays the public library with its historical functions has transformed into an important pillar of civil society. The multiplicity of public library functions is a key driver of their evolution by constantly developing new services, implementing the values of an inclusive society, and caring for cultural heritage. Meanwhile, the multiplicity poses a number of challenges, both in terms of technological development, which requires financial and human resource investments, and the adequacy of the legal framework. Latvia's public libraries are increasingly becoming aware of their role in improving the quality of life of citizens and are linking their activities to sustainable development strategies of relevant municipalities, towns or cities [Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka 2021]. It is a positive sign and also a signal to policy planners that adequate resources need to be provided. Public library services are based on a number of core tasks related to information, literacy, education, inclusion, civic participation and culture. By pursuing these important tasks, public libraries contribute to achieving sustainable development goals and to building a more just, humane and sustainable society.

Clarifying the definition and functions of libraries would ensure a more uniform range of services and facilities provided by libraries across the country, thus promoting the equal treatment of all library customers. Public libraries and their existence in a commercialised world are a phenomenon, providing access to high-quality, valuable, global knowledge and information, e-services and technologies, but one criticism is that the financing of libraries is not among priorities.

It is in public interests that libraries remain in existence and continue their development as places that implement and safeguard human rights, are inclusive, promote a more cohesive society, serve as a platform for various opinions and ideas. The interaction between the library and society contributes to the development of a democratic state and society, maintains and strengthens fundamental democratic values, and builds a better, safer and more prosperous life of society. Therefore, these values and rights should be consolidated by all available means, including legal tools. Legislation does not show the social nature of libraries and their real mission and functions, so they are perceived as voluntary and optional. The social aspect of libraries is linked to the right of association, making it possible for libraries to function as a common public space, a centre of communication, a place for discussions and meetings. Differences in the perception of the functions of libraries lead to differences in financing and supply of resources, staff remuneration, and the inequality of libraries, their development and the range and quality of information resources and services offered, so that people from different regions are not provided with equal opportunities. To eliminate this situation and strengthen the status of public libraries, relevant amendments need to be made to

the Library Law. It is expected that, with adequate financial and human resources prescribed by law, public libraries would develop even more dynamically, safely and sustainably, thus contributing significantly to the development of society.

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